

RICHARD BONYNGE

CONDUCTOR

The Guardian

Roberto Devereux

Holland Park, London

Tim Ashley

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Roberto Devereux has claims to being Donizetti's greatest score, though UK opera companies have shied away from it until recently. Much has been made of its flouting of historical veracity in its presentation of Elizabeth I and the Earl of Essex as a pair of manipulative connivers at the centre of a bitter examination of desire and political abuse. Elizabeth, repressed and unstable, sends Essex to the block when she discovers his affair with Sara, wife of the Duke of Nottingham. The opera's force lies in its tacit parallels between the Queen's arbitrary power over Essex and his almost casual destruction of the Nottinghams' marriage.

Opera Holland Park's outstanding new production will hopefully secure the work a place in the regular repertoire. The conductor is Richard Bonyngé, the director Lindsay Posner: both are strong on the sense of psychological malaise that lurks beneath the work's brilliant, if unsteady surface. Bonyngé's sense of pacing is immaculate, so that every arpeggio and rhythmic figuration betrays someone's strained mental state. Posner conjures up a torch-lit Tudor hellhole where Majella Cullagh's Elizabeth, looking like some gilded, predatory insect, is losing her grip on a court whose endless rituals, choreographed by Adam Cooper, have a totalitarian rigidity.

Cullagh's ability to alternate between wheedling lyricism and vicious coloratura tell us exactly why Elizabeth's hold over Leonardo Capalbo's Essex is so deadly; his voice is a bit dark for Donizetti, though he's entirely credible as a sensualist on the make. Yvonne Howard's Sara is infinitely vulnerable. Julian Hubbard, as her husband, is terrific in his depiction of a mild-mannered man forced to adopt violence as the sole means of preserving his integrity. Recommended.

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